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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

TRANSCRIPT OF THE SPECIAL BRIEFING

ON THE GUYANA SITUATION
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1978

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
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RDS for XDS EXT. DATE _____
TS AUTH. _____ REASON(S) _____
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MR. CARTER: This is a one subject briefing. The briefer is again Deputy Assistant Secretary Bushnell. The subject is Guyana and the associated information that goes with that particular tragedy.

MR. BUSHNELL: I thought that Wednesday might be the last time I would be here, but I think there has been enough developments since to warrant going over them and putting them in perspective for you.

The first thing that I might do is to review our latest statistics which I have just gotten from our Ambassador in Guyana within the last hour.

As with any numbers, I think it would be dangerous to concentrate on these as being right down to the last one or two, but it at least gives a general frame.

As of about an hour ago 485 bodies had been moved from Jonestown to either a staging area where they would be lowered into helicopters or further. Some bodies, of course, have already -- quite a number -- have already arrived at Dover. But from, in some point of movement, 485. Twenty additional bodies have been bagged and they have just made this morning a rather careful hand count of 270 additional bodies. That gives a total of 775. That does not include the five bodies that we have already identified; four who died in Georgetown itself of the Peoples Temple members, one Peoples Temple member who died in the incident at the airport, and, of course, it does not include the members of the CODEL.

They do not believe that that is a fully complete number. There are a relatively small number, or they think there may be a relatively small number, of additional bodies in the Jonestown area not included in that count.

But that is where we stand at the moment as far as the numbers are concerned; approaching 800. Until these bodies are moved and processed we will not have a final definitive count. That may not even be until some time tomorrow afternoon.

This does not mean that we have found an area removed and separate from Jonestown where there were a

large number of bodies. These bodies have been found in the Jonestown area.

I would recall that the original estimate that we had last Monday and Tuesday of about 400, or 410 was the figure some people were using, was a rough preliminary estimate made by the Guyanese police forces when they initially came into the area. It was not obviously a careful head-by-head count.

The circumstances in the area -- and I think I can only describe them as being virtually unimagineable, particularly as of this week in the tropics has progressed -- has not made it a very pleasant task working there. The personnel all use gas masks and other protective gear. Counting the bodies has not been a high priority for the people on the ground. Going ahead with the identification and the bagging in order to bring them out has been the high priority.

So, it has only been as we have come down towards the end of this, moving the number of bodies out, that we have begun to come to more of a count.

Quite a number of the bodies of infants have been found under the bodies of adults and were obviously not counted in the first round. The present estimate is that among the dead are 180 children, at least 180 children under fifteen.

Our general effort, as I think you are aware from other sources, to move the bodies by helicopter down to Georgetown and then by the C-141s to Dover, is progressing. It is moving as rapidly as we can. It will continue through tomorrow, probably into Saturday, before we get all of these bodies lifted off from Jonestown and Georgetown and into Dover. It may even run into Sunday before the last planes arrive.

Let me turn to one other aspect of this story, which I think giving you some specifics which are not quite so gruesome will be useful. That has been the question that has arisen in a number of areas: Were we doing enough to search for potential survivors who might have left the camp and been in the jungle surrounding the camp?

I would say, and as I said from this platform before and has been clear throughout with all elements of the U.S. Government working on this, is that the highest priority has been given to the caring for the living and the seeking of survivors who might be alive. We have done that throughout this operation and continue to do that today.

Because we have seen until we have gotten these latest counts that there seem to be quite a number of people who were missing, high priority has been given to seeking of survivors in the jungle areas. As you know, on Monday and Tuesday a few people, a small number, were found. U.S. aircraft have been directed to reconnoiter the area from the air and, in fact, these searches and shuttle flights continue.

Yesterday aircraft were devoted to going up and down the rivers. Today four helicopters are flying search patterns announcing by bullhorns that help is available. However, because of the conditions the main search effort has been carried out on the ground by those who know the countryside.

This was the responsibility of the Government of Guyana. Since Tuesday the Guyanese defense force has been using a batallion-size force, 300 to 400 people, to conduct ground searches along jungle trails in the region. All trails out of Jonestown -- a limited number -- have been searched and the inhabitants along them have been interviewed. Starting Wednesday they have been using guides from the local Indian tribes in the area.

On Thursday a reconnaissance helicopter with a joint U.S. and Guyanese crew spent the entire day combing the region, touching down at clearings at Indian settlements and talking with the people to see if there was any evidence of any survivors in the area.

In this effort we believe the region has been thoroughly covered. We believe that in talking to the Indians and the search that has been made we would have turned up any clues if there were survivors in the area. No trace of any additional survivors has appeared.

Moreover, of the few survivors that returned to Jonestown did not themselves, in talking with them, indicate that there were others in the jungle.

Nonetheless, we think that we should leave no stone unturned, and we are continuing the intensive search effort with the Guyanese with the main responsibility being theirs.

I should point out this is an area of jungle canopy, such as many of you have seen in Vietnam where it is literally impossible to see even things as big as tanks and trucks in the jungle canopy from the air. So finding individuals would be extremely hard. The helicopter

search is obviously not the best way to go about this.

Our main contribution to the search has been to provide needed equipment to the Guyanese police and military engaged in this which they lacked. I can indicate what some of this equipment was. For example, we have provided sixteen portable radios, walkie-talkies, three-FM base stations, two single side band radios, a number of sleeping bags, blankets, some thousands of sea rations, five outboard motors, five power generators, a large number of flashlights, ponchos and canteens, the sorts of things that these people have needed to maintain deployment in this area working on this project over the last week.

As we have gotten the latest figures, it does not suggest that there is any large number of survivors out there, but even if there are only a few we want to make every effort to identify them and do what we can to rescue them.

This effort will continue until we are quite sure that there are not any further survivors. In part that will come about as we are able to process some of the documentation that we have recovered from the Peoples Temple and can get some better listing of names and more precise information of how many people were in the Temple in the Jonestown settlement on last Saturday.

With that I will stop this introduction and take questions.

Q Your figure of 775, you said it does not include how many people who died in Georgetown and the others? How many is it; five in total?

A There were five bodies which we took out of Georgetown who did not die in Jamestown. This constituted four people in one family who died in Georgetown itself last Saturday and one person from the Temple who died with the CODEL.

Q And how many survivors have there been either that have shown up in Georgetown or somewhere else? Because you mentioned 72 this week.

A There is now something between seventy and eighty people. This includes, as I said, several categories. Some who were at the offic of the Peoples Temple in Georgetown last Saturday. They were not in Jonestown. Some who went to the airport -- to Port Kaituma -- with the CODEL and never went back to Jonestown. Some who escaped from Jonestown, which is a relatively small

number, at the time of the events there last Saturday.

But the sum total of that is in the vicinity of 75 to 80. I am not sure of a precise figure on that.

Q In addition to this logistical support that you mention our giving the Guyanese defense forces, are we paying the Government of Guyana anything or providing any sort of subsidy for them to carry out the search or to do anything else in connection with this incident?

A No, we are not. They are meeting their own expenses beyond the sorts of things that we are providing to them, and they have made no request for financing. They have made requests for specific items which they needed.

Q Mr. Bushnell, to clarify where these additional bodies were counted. They were all presumably around the shed where the other bodies were or were any in the jungle? Could you elaborate a little on that?

A I don't have full details on this. They were all in the settlement. That does not necessarily mean they were around the pavilion. I think some reports I have seen suggest some were found in the hospital, some may have been found in other buildings in other parts of the settlement.

I suppose it is not completely clear where the definition of the settlement and the jungle begins, but essentially they were not found at a distance from the Jonestown settlement. They were found in the immediate region, but not necessarily all around the pavilion, although obviously that is where the largest number was.

Q Did they seem to have died from poisoning or were there additional gunshot cases?

A Until all the bodies are processed we cannot be definitive on that. But thus far we have found only a hand full that have gunshot wounds.

Q Are these new bodies?

A Of the bodies that have been processed. We cannot separate new from old. Essentially our teams have gone in there and have begun processing the bodies one at a time. They haven't selected any new versus old. They processed them as they come to them.

Q By all indications and these new figures, it would indicate that there are few, if any, survivors at all. How many would you estimate based on how many

people there were at Jonestown?

A We have at the moment recovered about 870 passports. That may include, of course, some duplications, old passports, new passports, until we process them.

We have had several people count the numbers of beds in the Jonestown community and the count is about 600 single beds.

We have a petition which was signed showing solidarity with the Reverend Jones, which was signed in early November, which has between 600 and 700 names signed on it.

If we take these sorts of indications I think the suggestion is that there is not a large number of people unaccounted for. That is not necessarily to say that there are no people unaccounted for, although that is conceivable that we have none unaccounted for. But we certainly have now a number of bodies which seems to be in the vicinity of what other indications and sources would suggest were the number of people who were in Jonestown last Saturday.

Q Mr. Bushnell, that petition you referred to, is that the one that protested the eminent visit of Congressman Ryan or the projected visit of Congressman Ryan?

A I have not read the text of that, so I cannot say whether it protested it or not. It is a petition, I gather, that was executed to show support for Reverend Jones and I gather was done in anticipation of the visit of the CODEL.

Q Is that available here, the text of that?

A I do not believe that the text is available here. I think that our Embassy in Georgetown has a copy of it. But I am not sure it is available here. I haven't myself seen it.

Q Do you have any figure for the cost of the whole operation, including transport to Dover, sending down the airplanes, the whole thing?

A I don't have any figure on that. In fact, to come up with any reliable figure will take a lot of time to get all the accounting done.

Furthermore, I think there are some very major conceptual problems in how one looks at the cost. Most of the manpower involved here -- in fact, all of

it on the U.S. Government side -- are people that are already employed, already being paid, either in the military or in the Foreign Service or in the FBI or whatever it might be that are working on this problem. Should one include their salaries for this time or should one not? That is a conceptual problem which would make a significant difference in the cost.

Similarly, very little new equipment has been bought for this operation. We are using airplanes, helicopters, even a mortuary, all of which were in the inventory, in effect, and are being used for this purpose. How should one consider in doing cost depreciation on this, if at all?

There are clearly costs, such as the purchase of gasoline, the payment of additional per diem, which have a special relationship to this mission.

But even beyond this there is the question of training that a number of people who have rather difficult responsibilities are getting through with, training which would if there were a training exercise have been costly.

So, to come up with figures on this is very hard.

My indication is that, the last thing that the people told me as head of the task force, in terms of the cost now being accumulated we are between two and three million. There will be additional costs obviously coming in. We still have more flights to run in terms of bringing out additional bodies and in terms of returning the equipment which is down there. Just where this figure will come out eventually and on what concept it should be done, I think are questions that will require a lot of sorting out.

Q Can you clarify, though, where you get the $2 million or $3 million figure? Is that the gasoline and per diem figure as distinct, then, from the salaries you were trying not to count?

A That is correct. Those are the costs that are identified in the current DOD system as being associated with this operation.

Q Mr. Bushnell, you speak of large numbers of children buried underneath their parents or other adults. What other reasons would you have for this rather dramatic rise in the figures that you're talking about, or is that the sole reason?

A I don't think that's the sole reason. I

think that, as I said at least when I first gave out the 400 figure, that was a figure quickly done by the Guyanese people who moved into the area initially in the dark and in the rain; the rain continued and this was a very difficult situation. It is not clear on what precise basis they came up with that figure. It was not ever presented as a careful count, and given the situation and the basic unpleasantness of the situation there, I don't think that it is too surprising that the number was off. Obviously, it was off by a considerable amount.

Also, I do not have a feel yet as to how many bodies have been found in other buildings and so forth which they might not have been aware of at the time they gave their first estimate. Both the Guyanese forces and our own people have been rather careful the last couple of days, as it was obvious that there were more bodies, that until they had had time to do something somewhat more systematic not to simply give out another estimate which might also have been totally wrong. Even today, as I said, we are not sure that we have counted all the bodies. Until more are processed and they can really comb the area, and make sure that they have processed all the bodies there, we will not have a final figure.

Q So, you're suggesting the number has been rising steadily over the past couple days?

A Let me put it this way: It seems that all the bodies that were there on Saturday was the population of bodies. As work has proceeded and has become apparent to people working that as they had processed 300 there were more than 100 left. Precisely how many were left would require counting, and they thought they had more important things to do in order to keep up with their schedules and meet the ability to move the bodies out of there than to go around and count.

Q Was the first count the one that came up with the 409 figure on Monday or Tuesday, was that done on the ground or from the air?

A It is my information that that was an estimate made by the people on the ground.

Q Given the new count, Mr. Bushnell, and the rate at which these bodies are being processed and flown to Dover, when would you think the operation would be completed?

A We have a number of uncertainties in this situation. We will try to proceed, obviously, just as rapidly as we can. It is quite clear that we will not get the last bodies out of Jonestown until sometime

very late tomorrow or Sunday. That will put them in Dover, of course, with a lag for loading in Georgetown on the seven-hour flight. If things go wrong, if the weather turns bad on us, it could slip further. If we get these torrential downpours, then the helicopters cannot fly.

Q Mr. Bushnell, many of the relatives of these dead people have been complaining about the financial hardship they will have to endure once they claim the bodies and fly them back to San Francisco and make preparations for a funeral. Is there any contemplation given to the chance of loading these bodies onto a plane and flying it to Travis Air Force Base somewhere near San Francisco where most of these people, where their home town was located, so that it would ease the hardship on these relatives?

A Let me define how we have at this point decided what it is reasonable for the U.S. Government to pay for and what should be paid in some other way. This has been, no matter which number one uses, a terrible calamity virtually unprecedented in recent times. It has happened in a remote area of a relatively poor country which itself did not have the capability to handle this sort of situation in terms of identifying bodies and processing them and working this problem out. Moreover, the people involved were almost all Americans. In fact, probably the only organization in the world that could have coped with this problem in a reasonable time is the U.S. military, so that we felt that it was only reasonable for the U.S. Government to use the resources that were available in terms of transportation, in terms of technical expertise and body processing, both in Guyana and then at the Dover facility in order to identify the maximum number of these people. We have proceeded to do that at the taxpayers' cost with government funds.

Once the remains have been identified and processed at Dover, they can then be handled by the normal commercial funeral director services in the United States. They are experienced at doing this. They have arrangements to receive them at Dover and to process them. From that point on, the instructions will be, of course, different depending on the various beliefs and circumstances of next-of-kin. We felt that that was really the point at which we should turn it over. That is the situation in which the incident, as far as remains goes, ceases to be so unusual that only a major effort by the government with its special facilities could handle it, and it could then be handled in the normal way.

I should point out that the standard is for Americans dying overseas that the U.S. Government is not responsible for the disposal of the remains or for bringing them home -- this is left up to the families.

So, on the one hand, I suppose, as is often the case, we will be in the middle between those people who think we shouldn't have met any expenses and those who think we should meet all the expenses until final interment. But it seems to us that a reasonable and logical break in that process was at the point after the processing in Dover where the established funeral director industry in this country can reasonably assume the responsibility.

Q Many of these families were poor black families who were the parents of some of the people who died in there. In other words, you are saying you haven't set up any way so that even these families can get some type of special consideration if they absolutely can't afford to handle the --

A The State Department has not really addressed that issue, and I don't know what the status would be in terms of that if these families are in a welfare situation, how in the various states, which I suppose are different, would handle the situation; but I think that is the area in which that would have to be looked at, and I suppose it would depend on the states and the various localities, and so forth.

Q What do you plan to do with unclaimed bodies, if any?

A To the extent that there are unidentified -- and we cannot rule that out; there will be some really horrendous identification problems, particularly of children -- unidentified bodies or unclaimed bodies that will be the responsibility of the government to give them a decent and dignified burial in the Dover area.

Q You said a few moments ago that almost all the victims were Americans. Were there any non-Americans among them?

A We have found four non-U.S. passports among the passports that we have looked at. We understand that there were some children who were born in Guyana who were living in the camp. We have not yet determined whether or not they have been adopted and assumed American citizenship or not. These numbers, as you see, are very small, but there does appear to have been a rather small number --

Q What kind of passports?

A I don't recall precisely what the four non-U.S. passports were.

Q Mr. Bushnell, why were these bodies not flown directly to California? Why were they flown to a

point 3,000 miles away from where most of the parents and relatives were from?

A We faced the problem of moving these bodies as rapidly as we could from where they were in Guyana to the closest facility which could reasonably handle them which was Dover and which we can make with the C-141 in one hop. This was the facility which the Department of Defense felt was best set up, the most adequate to serve them. Therefore, given these logistical considerations, that is the facility that we decided to use. If you recognize that Guyana is quite far east, their time is two hours ahead of ours, and you recognize that, geographically, there is a lot of east-west distance between Guyana and California as well as, of course, the north-south distance, which is about the same whether you're going to Delaware or to California. Therefore, that was the logistical consideration that moved us to choose Dover, as well as the consideration, for reasons which aren't completely clear in detail to me, that this facility seemed to be the best Department of Defense facility to handle this task.

Q Who paid for the shipment of the bodies of the newsmen back to California?

A I believe that they were moved on the same plane as the Congressman, and whether that will be paid for out of Congressional appropriations out of the Executive Branch we'll work out. The movement of the remains of the Congressman home is, of course, done at government expense.

Q Mr. Bushnell, the original reports from Jonestown said that American personnel thought that their top priority was looking for survivors. Was there any sort of change in mission? Were they originally told to go down and do one thing and then, in mid-stream, told to do something else, or was that just a misinterpretation?

A I think that's a misinterpretation, and I suppose it depends on whom you are talking to. The Graves Identification Unit, the people whose job it is to process bodies, if you talk to them, their job -- meaning the job of that unit -- was, obviously, to go down and get the bodies out. They were not involved in the search and rescue sort of operation, so at any given moment, you could find people whose job, if they spoke for them or their unit, was to get the bodies out, and the technical expertise that was needed for that was sent down there.

What I was talking about was the priority in

terms of the total U.S. Government effort was, first of all, to look for survivors and try to help them, and only the secondary priority was for moving the bodies.

Q There is a story today in the Post quoting Mr. Mark Lane and suggesting that he knew more about Jonestown than he told the newsmen before they went in there. Is any idea being given of talking to him as part of the whole investigation of this incident?

A I can confirm that consular officers from the Embassy talked to him when he was in Georgetown. What he said is covered by the Privacy Act -- what he said to us. What he said to you and others we'll all read.

Q Hodding, has there been a marked increase in the number of calls and letters the State Department is receiving from relatives of people who are members of other cults expressing concern?

MR. CARTER: I'll have to take the question. I don't know the answer. I can find out, however, and just put it to the Public Correspondence Division

Q Another part of that question, is the State Department considering changing its policy so that it becomes a little more aggressive in investigating these complaints, or is it going to stick with the position that it took on Jonestown, that this was basically a freedom-of-religion case?

MR. CARTER: I think as a matter of policy, I couldn't accept the premise of the question -- that in fact we did pursue the complaints.

Q I'm saying "more aggressively"; nobody is saying that you didn't --

A I guess even there, I have some difficulty. "More aggressively," meaning what, sending special teams out when you have this kind of thing?

Q Making an effort to arrive unannounced, or whatever.

A There are some problems inherent in a lot of this, including what the responsibilities and rights are of consular officers are in relation to American citizens abroad, or at home for that matter. I believe that, obviously, the United States is going to examine what happened here and look at it very closely. But I have to start with the premise that in fact the consular service, and the consular officers specifically in Georgetown who went to Jonestown, did investigate aggressively and made every

effort that they could to find out what the situation was.

But let me, on your other question, if you don't mind just give a check back on the News Room and to the Press Office this afternoon.

Q Could I ask just one question about the cost of the transport of the bodies from Dover to California. If there any consideration being given to using what I believe is a sum of money found in Jonestown, for this purpose?

MR. BUSHNELL: There are very complicated estate and related questions that relate to that money. It is also not clear what role the Peoples Temple organization in Californ will play in this matter. However, some of the survivors of this group are members of the Peoples Temple, and conceivably, that could be an outcome. But that is really up to the individ involved to decide, and will be dealt with by them.

Q Has there been some discussion in Georgetown amongst the American Public Health advisers and the Guyanese of having to raze Jonestown and burn it to the ground because of the public health problem?

A The general status of the health problem has been kept under continual review. They have not come to the conclusion that something like that was necessary at this time, and I think by the nature of that problem, it will not be able to be assessed until all of the bodies are removed and there is a certain passage of time. Then that issue would have to be addressed, depending on the situation at that time.

Q But it has been discussed?

A To my knowledge, that has not been discussed among people there. I think they have had other more urgent problems to be thinking about in the state that we are now in.

Q Was there any expert pathologist who examined the body of Jim Jones specifically there, or will any special medical attention be placed on his body in Dover?

A The Guayanese medical examiner, I think it is safe to say, focused particularly on his case in site. I cannot comment on what will be done at Dover. You would have to get that from the people there.

MR. CARTER: Since we are not having a briefing, I would just remind you that we do have a skeleton staff in the Press Office. If there are other subjects that concern you, put them. On that specific question, I'll see whether I can't get the Public Correspondence Division to answer it.

Q Thank you.

(The briefing was concluded at 12:50 p.m.)

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